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The missing link
AGRIPPINA
THE YOUNGER

The excavation of the surviving remains of the stately Roman domus outside Mdina in 1881 brought to light a series of marble sculptures that have been found along the years to represent the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54) and close members of his family.

A headless marble statue of a draped female figure was discovered during that same clearance operation. So far no one, not even the present writer, seems to have seriously attempted to identify who this headless statue really represented. The following is a preliminary presentation of a piece of research work in progress on this issue.

Introduction

I have been involved in the study of the Greco-Roman sculpture in Maltese collections since 1970 when I started compiling the catalogue *raisonné* of such sculpture for my Italian doctorate dissertation which, owing to my desire to augment and perfect it even further, remained unpublished till the present day, even though the University Library and that of the National Museum of Archaeology possess a copy of that dissertation.¹ At that point in time, for the purposes of the catalogue, I dealt with each sculptural item individually, independently from each other; which somehow made me frequently miss the wood for the trees. Eventually, I realized that some items in the catalogue belonged to the same category and formed coherent groups. Thus, for example, a group of small marble heads of Greco-Roman divinities – such as Hermes, Dionysus and Hercules – turned out to be small herms, probably intended as ornaments of indoor or outdoor furniture, and were published as such in an Italian academic journal.² Similarly, a number of Roman marble portrait busts, both male and female, four of which had been previously published as typically Roman, but in the Punic tradition,³ were found to really belong to a class of funerary portraits originating from the ancient city of Cyrene in eastern Libya, from where they somehow found their way into the Maltese national archaeological collection in modern times.⁴

But the most important group was the one formed of at least twelve fragmentary marble sculptures most of which were recovered during the fortuitous discovery of the Roman domus at Rabat during a clearance operation of part of the Knights' period glacis outside the Mdina fortifications, near Greeks' Gate, in 1881. That archaeological operation was supervised by the Director of the National Library of the time,

Dr Annetto Antonio Caruana, who published a short report of it within the same year.⁵ In that report Caruana included a black-and-white photograph of seven of these sculptural items. In the photograph, for some unknown reason, he left out a life-size statue of a draped female figure which he included, however, in the list of recovered sculptures;⁶ it is this statue that is the main object of this article. He also left out fragments of three togate male statues that he included in the same list. He could not include a larger-than-life-size statue of a man clothed in toga, which was discovered later by Themistocles Zammit during his excavation of the area to the north of the Roman domus in 1922.⁷

The Cycle of Imperial Portrait Statues

The above-mentioned fragments of three male portrait statues must have represented portraits of personalities that cannot be identified because the only surviving parts are the legs, from the knees down in one case, and only the feet in the other two.⁸ It is unlikely that they could have formed part of the imperial group because of the inferior workmanship of the carving displayed by the surviving fragments. On the other hand, the presence of a *scrinium* or *capsa* (a cylindrical box intended to hold scrolled manuscript documents) behind the left foot, in each case, tends to suggest magistrates, among whom, possibly, the contemporary owner of the house. The other pieces that I shall mention briefly all seem to belong to a cycle of portrait statues representing the reigning Emperor and members of his immediate family.

Claudius, the Emperor who reigned between AD 41 and 54 is immediately recognizable in the larger-than-life-size head of a man of mature age.⁹ It is, in fact, one of the most successful and artistic images of this emperor. In time, I started





suspecting that this portrait head must have belonged to the larger-than-life-size statue of a man dressed in toga that came out of a deep deposit behind the north wall of the museum during Zammit's excavations in 1922.¹⁰ Although the head is broken at the neck and lacks its lowest part that would have fitted firmly inside the hollow between the shoulders of the draped statue, the respective dimensions confirmed the combination, and when the new Domus Romana museum was set up by Heritage Malta in 2005, the head was mounted over its statue.

A similar combination I proposed between the bust of a young lady, which preserved the head in almost perfect condition but whose breast and upper torso were hacked away, and a better preserved lower torso of a female draped statue.¹¹ The latter presented a hollow space at the top which was intended to receive the upper torso that appeared to have been sculpted in one piece together with the head. The proposed combination was based both on the correspondence of dimensions and on the iconography of entire portrait statues of the same lady in other Roman archaeological sites abroad, such as Rusellae and Veleia in Italy, and Cherrhell in Algeria. This proposed combination was also taken on board by Heritage Malta and the two separate sections have been mounted together in the current display, in spite of the missing middle part.

This portrait and many others of the same person, recognizable mostly from its singular hairstyle, have been assigned to different female members of the Julio-Claudian family, the most prevalent one being Antonia Minor, mother of Claudius. But the very young age of the Malta portrait, corresponding to a young woman

Draped female statue. Marble.
From the 1881 excavations of the
Roman domus in Rabat, Malta.
a) View of right profile; b) front
view; c) view of left profile.

in her late teens or early twenties, especially when compared to the mature age of Claudius next to it, leaves little doubt that it must have represented a much younger person. And the member of the imperial family that fitted best in the chronological framework that has started to emerge was Claudia Antonia, daughter of Claudius born by his second wife Aelia Paetina in AD 29.

Thus, the possibility of a whole cycle of imperial portrait statues, like those of Veleia, Rusellae and Leptis Magna, started to take shape. The third most likely component in the Roman domus group was the headless togate statue of a child of approximately thirteen years of age also shown in Caruana's photo. It fitted well with young Nero, the son of Agrippina Minor, Claudius' fourth (and last) wife.¹² Again, although headless, he appeared to fit very well in the emerging chronological framework; many similar childhood portraits of him have survived throughout the empire, some still with their heads on, like the one in the Louvre Museum. Claudius adopted his stepson in AD 50 when Nero was fourteen and thus earmarked him for succession to the throne.

The age of each of these three members of Claudius' family seems to fit the year around AD 49, that is, a year after he married Agrippina the Younger, and a year before he adopted Nero, her son by her former husband. Claudius himself would have been almost sixty, having been born in 10 BC. His daughter would have been twenty years of age, having been born in AD 29, and Nero twelve-thirteen, a year before he was adopted by Claudius.

This leaves us with the fourth statue which is missing in Caruana's photo and which I am proposing for the first time as the possible missing link in the emerging cycle of portrait statues of, at least, the four closest members of Claudius's imperial family, namely, his wife Julia Agrippina,

better known as Agrippina the Younger. She was the daughter of Nero Cl. Drusus Germanicus (brother of Claudius) and Agrippina the Elder. She was thus granddaughter of Agrippa, the famous general and right-hand man of Augustus (the first Roman Emperor), through her mother, and niece of Claudius himself, through her father. She had married Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus and gave birth to Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus (later known as Nero) in AD 37.

The Statue

The white marble statue survives intact, apart from the missing head and neck (which were added in one separate piece) and the left hand. The marble of the statue has been identified by Professor L. Lazzarini as Pentelic.¹³ A broken section of the left shoulder has been rejoined, presumably in modern times.

It represents a female figure, draped from head to feet, with the outer thick-textured cloak (the *himation*) covering most of the lighter *chiton* as well as the head. The standing figure stands on its left leg, while flexing the right knee suggesting a slight movement forward of the right leg. It is not known what it held in its left hand, but the draped right hand grasps the thick vertical fold of the *himation* close to the right shoulder. The first impression that one gets is that this fully draped female statue with the cloak covering also the head corresponds to a type of female portrait statue called "Pudicitia", used widely in funerary contexts;¹⁴ but there are divergences which set it apart from that type. The closest parallel is a statue from Cyrene, which is also considered to be a variant of the type.¹⁵ The problem really is that with the absence of the veiled head and the left hand we cannot tell whether this particular statue really belongs to the "Pudicitia" type – the non-

funerary context suggests otherwise – or to the Ceres-with-Cornucopia type like the example in the Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek 531 (dated to late Claudian-Neronian), and the one in the Louvre (also Claudian). Indeed, the left hand might have held a clasp of wheat ears.

Portraits of Agrippina Minor

The next step is to investigate whether our statue could have portrayed Agrippina. A century ago Thomas Ashby already suspected the presence of a representation of Agrippina the Younger ‘type’ among the sculptures of the Roman domus,¹⁶ but his attention was directed to the portrait bust of Antonia, not to this statue which he did not attempt to identify.

There are many portrait heads that have been identified with Agrippina the Younger on fairly reliable grounds but, since no such head survives in the Rabat group, it would be futile to go through all these heads and the various arguments presented in favour or against their identification with this imperial lady. There are also many headless portrait statues with some similarities with our draped statue that have been assigned to the “Pudicitia” type, but unless they have an inscription securely attached to them with the name of the lady, like we have, for example, in the case of the statue of Livia Augusta in Gozo, they would not be of any (or much) help. Those that have a similar drapery typology and survive with their heads, however, can go a long way to help us reconstruct the identity of this statue. If any of these combine the same drapery typology with a portrait head securely identified as Agrippina Minor, it would add further probability to the circumstantial evidence that we already have. I have looked up all the portrait statues that have been identified as Agrippina,¹⁷ but none of them appears exactly in this style of drapery.

On the other hand, the pertinence of this velate statue to the Rabat domus group of imperial portraits is, in fact, very helpful. As many as ten such groups have been listed within which there are representations of Claudius’ last wife, and the list is still growing.¹⁸ Among these groups, of fundamental importance for the purpose of identifying the person represented in the Malta group is the cycle from the Basilica of Veleia now exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of the Palazzo della Pilotta in Parma.¹⁹ The Veleia statue identified by Cesare Saletti as Agrippina Minor is likewise velate, has exactly the same posture (same position of the feet, advanced right knee and forearms), exactly the same format of drapery, except for the thick vertical fold held by the right hand in the Maltese statue. This same vertical fold takes a short curve to rest on the left arm in the Veleia statue, instead of sweeping down as far as the knees in the Maltese specimen.

In her missing left hand the likeliest object she might have held is a clasp of ears of wheat which are the attributes of Ceres/Demeter, the same divinity with which the Livia statue of Gozo is associated. Indeed Agrippina appears wearing a wreath of wheat ears on gold coins of Claudius’ last years of reign (AD 50-54), that is, after her being granted the title of Augusta.²⁰ It seems that Agrippina was the first wife of a living Emperor to be awarded the title of Augusta (in AD 50), an honour of the highest order. This is reflected in the coins struck by the imperial mint in the following years. For the first time the emperor’s wife appears with him on the same issue, either on the reverse with Claudius occupying the obverse (coin of Ephesos dated 50/51), or on the same side, with Claudius’ profile superimposed over hers (another coin issued in Ephesos).

I do not think the last word on this hypothetical identification of the Rabat headless statue with Agrippina the Younger has been said. The possibility remains of it representing another

imperial lady, but the circumstantial evidence I brought forth above and in other places seems to be pointing more insistently to Claudius' wife and Nero's mother.

Notes

- 1 Bonanno 1971.
- 2 Bonanno 1977.
- 3 Sestieri 1938-39.
- 4 Bonanno 1976.
- 5 Caruana 1881.
- 6 Caruana 1881, p.7: "three white Carrara marble statues recovered from the rubbish". Item no. 3 described as "5' female wearing much the same garment of the Ceres Julia Augusta found at Gozo".
- 7 Zammit 1922, p. 25; Zammit 1924, p. 7.
- 8 Bonanno 1992, pls 30-32.
- 9 Some uncertainty prevailed in the first half-a-century after its discovery, with one scholar, Luigi Maria Ugolini (1931) identifying the head with Tiberius, an earlier emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.
- 10 Bonanno 1992, p. 22 pls 26-27.
- 11 Bonanno 1992, p. 23, pls 28-29.
- 12 Bonanno 1992, p.23, pl. 25.
- 13 Personal communication (24.02.2004). He also identified as Pentelic the statue of young Nero and, possibly the lower draped torso of Antonia while he opted for 'Carrara, possibly Pentelic' with respect to the colossal togate statue of Claudius. Quite a few years earlier, during her short visit to Malta on 14 October 1989, Dr (now Professor) Susan Walker, then attached to the British Museum, identified the marble of the statue in question as Carrara (or, possibly, Parian), Nero as Carrara, Antonia as Carrara. At that time, both Susan Walker and myself suspected that the statue of Claudius was pavonazzetto, judging by the purple stains on the front folds under the chest. According to Lazzarini, however, these seem to have resulted from oxidization by humidity of some minerals already present in the marble. There is general agreement that the head of Claudius is in Parian marble.
- 14 For the iconography of this statue type see Köhler 1965; and Vollkommer 1994.
- 15 Traversari 1960: no. 27, pl. 15,2; Alföldi-Rosenbaum 1960: no 166, pl. 75,1.
- 16 Ashby 1915: 38-39, fig. 9: "A headless, erect female statue (5 feet high) with long chiton and himation which must have veiled her head."
- 17 For the more recent publications on the iconography of Agrippina Minor, which carry also the previous

bibliography on the subject, see the range of articles by different authors in Moltesen and Nielsen 2007.

- 18 Among which, to cite a few of the closest to our group, Rusellae, Veleia, Olympia, Herculaneum, Cosa, etc. See Moltesen 2007: 133.
- 19 Saletti 1968: 26-30; Fittschen and Zanker 1983: 5, note 3; Rose 1997: *passim*.
- 20 Gradel 2007: 19.

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